

The University of Chicago

THE PROBLEM OF ORIGINALITY IN
ENGLISH LITERARY CRITICISM
1750-1800

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

1936

By
ELIZABETH LOIS MANN

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THE PROBLEM OF ORIGINALITY IN ENGLISH LITERARY CRITICISM, 1750-1800

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The frequent appearance of the phrases "original composition" and "original genius" in English criticism of the latter half of the eighteenth century has often been commented on and labelled as a "romantic" phenomenon. The anti-authoritarian element in the praise of originality has been over-emphasized, however, and according to the prejudices of modern investigators, been regarded either as an early flash of spirit in a cold and formal age, or as a first step toward lawless subjectivity and decadence in the arts. In reality, the problem of originality was by no means the exclusive concern of a few critics who rebelled against traditional literary canons. The charms of originality, the lack of it in current literature, the means of promoting it occupied the attention not only of Edward Young, in his *Conjectures on Original Composition*, and of William Duff, in *An Essay on Original Genius*—to cite two rather truculent essays upon the subject—but also of Richard Hurd, the Wartons, Samuel Johnson, Joshua Reynolds, Hugh Blair, and a host of other critics and reviewers, in writings of extremely varied scope and purpose.

Much of what these critics had to say on the materials and psychological conditions of original composition was not at all new or revolutionary. Obvious in the whole discussion was the convention of treating the art of poetry as a department of rhetoric. In the tradition of Cicero, Quintilian and Horace, critics of the later eighteenth century were still reminding the cultivated world that the aim of poetry is to please and to excite the passions; that a genius may accomplish this end in a number of possible ways: perhaps by imitating or adapting what has already pleased; perhaps by combining familiar literary materials according to a number of possible formulae; perhaps by discovering new sources of thoughts, charac-

ters, "beauties," in a universe often said to be infinite, but really well classified and mapped in the critic's mind.

It is the purpose of this study, first, to indicate briefly all the main conceptions of originality which came to the front during the latter half of the eighteenth century; and second, to show which of these were actually the newest or most revolutionary among established theories of the materials, aims and methods of art.

I

There were three types of theories regarding the sources and conditions of originality. One dealt with the sources from which the artist draws his themes, subjects or ideas. Another dealt with the psychological conditions of imaginative creation. The other dealt with the value of diversity among human personalities, and with the source of originality as lying in the unique individual qualities of the artist himself.

1. The kinds of literary materials most often involved in discussions of the available means of attaining novelty were these: the supernatural or "the marvelous"—a world created entirely out of the author's imagination; the distinctive customs of the author's own era and locality, constituting a superficial but interesting variety overlying the basic simplicity and sameness of nature; and the "minutiae" of a highly diverse human and non-human universe. The descriptions of the first two kinds of subject-matter were more conventional, less disturbing to certain traditional theories regarding nature and poetry, than the last. That special field of literary material, therefore (the "minutiae" of nature), and the uniqueness of the author himself require special treatment in section II.

The belief that events, characters and scenes of a marvelous, remote or even supernatural kind make the most promising materials for original composition was derived partly from long-standing theories of epic poetry, and partly from a conception of the imagination formulated by "associationist" psychology. Man's "original stock of ideas," wrote Hume, in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), is furnished only by the senses; but the imagination is perfectly free, for it "has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing those ideas, to all the varieties of fact and vision."¹ What this power might mean in the realm of poetic imagery had been suggested long before by Hobbes, in the famous example of the man, the horse and the centaur. Lord

¹*Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (new ed.; London, 1770), III, 71.

Kames endowed this associative power of the imagination with the name "creative," and emphasized its ability to produce absolutely new images.² John Gregory, in *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Men* (1766), was one of many who cited Shakespeare's famous passage on "the poet's eye," from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, as pertinent to this aspect of imagination, and who assumed that the more original the poet, the more unusual and strange the images which he would present.³ Alexander Gerard, referring often to Locke, also spoke of the associative power of the imagination as "creative," and productive of novelty. Many critics pointed to the "preternatural"⁴ creations of Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, or to the sylphs in Pope's *Rape of the Lock* as the best proofs of the originality of these poets, and recommended further trials in this "field of fancy."⁵ John Aikin, in his *Essay on Song-Writing* (1772), expressed a common view as follows, in a passage leading up to the much-quoted Shakespearian lines:

But the mind of man cannot long be confined within prescribed limits; there is an internal eye constantly stretching its view beyond the bounds of natural vision, and something new, something greater, more beautiful, more excellent, is required to gratify its noble longing. This eye of the mind is imagination—it peoples the world with new beings, it embodies abstract ideas, it suggests unexpected resemblances, it creates first, and then presides over its creation with absolute sway. . . .⁶

J. Moir wrote appreciatively in 1785 of "preternatural characters crowding in groups on original minds,"⁷ and in 1798 Shakespeare's lines were still being quoted as supreme authority for this conception of original poetic creation. The essence of genius, wrote William Jackson, in an essay called "The middle way not always the best," is "invention, a creation of something not before existing,"

²*Elements of Criticism* (Edinburgh, 1762), III, 385-86.

³(2nd ed.; London, 1766), p. 143.

⁴*An Essay on Genius* (London, 1774), p. 29.

⁵J. Warton, "Observations on *The Tempest*," *Adventurer*, No. 97, October 13, 1753 (London, 1753-54), II, 157; *British Magazine*, I (October, 1760), 587; R. Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (London, 1762), p. 120; K. L., "Parallel between Shakespeare and Milton," *British Magazine*, IV (July, 1763), 335-36; *ibid.*, VI (February, 1765), 84-87; [W. Duff], *Essay on Original Genius* (London, 1767), p. 174; [Mrs. E. Montagu], *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare* (3d ed.; London, 1772), p. 133; "The Indian Observer," in *The Gleaner*, ed. N. Drake (London, 1811), IV, 256-57. Cf. R. W. Babcock, *Genesis of Shakespeare Idolatry* (Chapel Hill, 1931), p. 76, on the growing tendency, after 1765, to call Shakespeare's preternatural characters his most original and admirable inventions.

⁶(New ed.; London, 1810), pp. 5-6.

⁷*Gleanings* (London, [1785]), I, 31.

or "a creative power to 'body forth the shapes of things unknown, and give to aery nothing a local habitation and a name.'"⁸

But "aery nothing" was by no means the only field thought to be still open to the artist in search of original subject-matter. Many critics who conceived the general laws and truths of nature to be few and simple (as did most of those who counseled deserting nature entirely for the supernatural), believed that there was still ample opportunity to exercise original observation and choice, and to create novel and interesting effects, by representing the characteristics of humanity and of scene which distinguish different eras and nations.

The habit of studying masterpieces of the past with the physical and social conditions of their composition in view was already well established by the middle of the century. It rested upon a thesis concerning the diversity of peoples, according to their geographical situation and conditions of government and civilization, fully developed during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The Wartons, Thomas Blackwell, Robert Lowth, Richard Hurd, Hugh Blair, and Robert Wood were among the prominent critics of the mid-eighteenth century to insist upon the necessity of the historical point of view in literary criticism. Joseph Warton's general statement would have been assented to by all of them: "We can never completely relish, or adequately understand, any author, especially any ancient, except we constantly keep in our eye, his climate, his country, and his age."⁹ This idea was applied to the interpretation of Greek, Hebrew and "Gothic" literature, including Ossian; and the parallel idea emerged that contemporary writers, too, will not only unconsciously reflect the conditions of their place and time, but also should consciously set out to study and record them. Johnson's well-known statement of this view, in the *Adventurer*, No. 95, is typical. After calling attention to the sameness of truth and morality in all ages, he proceeded:

[Authors] are to observe the alterations which time is always making in the modes of life, that they may gratify every generation with a picture of themselves. Thus love is uniform, but courtship is perpetually varying . . . Here then is the fund, from which those who study mankind may fill their compositions with an inexhaustible variety of images and allusions . . . the mutability of mankind will always furnish writers with new images, and the luxuriance of fancy may always embellish them with new decorations.¹⁰

⁸*The Four Ages* (London, 1798), pp. 191, 196.

⁹*An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (London, 1756-82), I, 5.

¹⁰October 2, 1753, *Works* (Oxford, 1825), IV, 82-83.

The "mutability," then, as well as the uniformity, of mankind was to form part of the essential content of original composition.

2. While the proper selection of literary materials, as a source of originality, was being debated, much was being written also on emotional spontaneity and enthusiasm as a favorable psychological condition of originality. In its origin, this emphasis upon emotion or "the passions" was far from being anti-classical. It had been a common-place of neo-classic criticism that the aim of poetry and the fine arts in general was to please, and stir the passions. From Longinus, Horace and other classical critics came also the tradition that the author himself must possess unusual emotional susceptibility and fire in order to move the passions of others. As Henry Fielding said, in one of the critical chapters of *Tom Jones*,

The author who will make me weep, says Horace, must first weep himself. In reality, no man can paint a distress well, which he doth not feel while he is painting it; nor do I doubt, but that the most pathetic and affecting scenes have been writ with tears.¹¹

Sensibility was explicitly said, also, to be part of an author's creative gift, or to be responsible for the originality of his product. Thomas Warton, for instance, in his *Observations on The Fairy Queen* (1754; 2d ed., enlarged, 1762), spoke of Spenser's poetry as "the careless exuberance of a warm imagination and a strong sensibility," and praised Spenser for writing "rapidly from his own feelings."¹² Later in the century, Cowper was sometimes praised on these grounds. One reviewer called *The Task* a "truly original production" chiefly because "conviction gives force to his imagination; and the poet dips his pen in the stream that religion hath opened in his own bosom."¹³ Another commentator also praised *The Task* for its originality, which consisted in its giving the appearance of being "the effusions of an honest benevolent heart, warmed and animated by the glorious truths of the Gospel; . . . He did not, it should seem sit down to think what to write. . . ."¹⁴ This conception, that "sitting down to think" obstructed the flow of original inspiration and feeling, also motivated a great deal of opposition to the practice of imitating literary models.

The theory was most completely developed, however, in writings on primitive poetry. It rested on the assumption that in a simple,

¹¹*Works* (London, 1762), III, 242.

¹²(New ed.; London, 1807), I, 21-23.

¹³*Monthly Review*, LXXIV (June, 1786), 416.

¹⁴*Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXVIII (September, 1795), 733.

hunting and war-making society, before the cultivation of letters and "civility," the elemental passions were more deeply felt and more warmly expressed, without control or concealment, than in modern European society. Since passion is the mainspring of poetry, it follows that the poetry of such eras is the most striking, sublime and original. James Macpherson and Hugh Blair developed this thesis in connection with Ossian. William Duff expounded it in a section of his *Essay* entitled, "That original genius will in general be displayed in its utmost vigour in the early and uncultivated periods of society, which are peculiarly favourable to it; and that it will seldom appear in a very high degree in cultivated life." A similar theme ran through *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* by Adam Ferguson, friend and associate of Blair and Kames in Edinburgh. A primitive poet is always original, said Ferguson, because "he delivers the emotions of the heart, in words suggested by the heart: for he knows no other."¹⁵ Such statements continued to appear in primitivistic writings throughout the century.

Although some primitivists came to the conclusion that this psychological condition of originality no longer existed in modern society, others found contemporary proof for their theories in occasional discoveries of humble and presumably unlettered geniuses. Burns was often hailed in such terms, and the now forgotten names of Ann Yearsley, "the Bristol Milk-woman," W. Hamilton Reid and Ann Batten Christall appeared in a few enthusiastic reviews. A review of the last-named author's *Poetical Sketches*, in the *Analytical Review* of March, 1795, is one of the most interesting, because, along with the usual praise of the poet's "untutored fancy" and "natural sensibility," the author gave examples, from the poems, of expressions which seemed to him wholly spontaneous and original. These included such phrases as "soft-breathed lute," "raptur'd breast," "bubbling rills," "balmy sweets," "varying prospects," "burning orb," "nectar'd flowers," and "wild songsters"!

This rather conventional praise of "enthusiasm" and spontaneity was consistent with the belief in the uniformity of nature and of taste. Similarities in expression, for instance, between "primitive" poets such as Homer and Ossian were often pointed out as *proof* of such natural uniformity. Consistent with the thesis of uniformity, also, were the two definitions of original subject-matter as con-

¹⁵(Edinburgh, 1767), pp. 265-66.

sisting in "the marvelous," and in local and contemporary circumstances. Sylphs, ghosts, monsters and personified abstractions, it is true, do not belong to the uniform world of nature, but they act, as Hurd and Gerard and others pointed out, according to consistent laws of their creators' making, which fulfill certain universal expectations. As to local circumstances, they were not meant to absorb an author's whole attention, but only to give superficial variety and freshness to the fundamentally simple and uniform themes.

II

More revolutionary in implication, and occasionally in application, were two other theories already mentioned. One was the theory that an inexhaustible fund of original materials for literature exists among the diverse particulars of all nature. The other was that the source of originality lies in the unique, individual characteristics of the author himself. Both theories rest upon the assumption that nature is to be chiefly regarded not as simple and uniform, but as complex and diverse. Though the latter view of nature was current before and during the early eighteenth century, the eager curiosity about details which it tended to foster, the disposition to differentiate and particularize rather than generalize, were new. The tendency, also, to interpret the "infinite variety" of the world as evidence of the power and benevolence of the Creator had, as Professor Lovejoy has shown, profound consequences in building up certain attitudes known as "romantic."¹⁶

1. A few critics who on the whole upheld the uniformitarian view occasionally spoke out, as classical rhetoricians had done, for distinctness and realism of detail in art. Just as Longinus had said that one of the aims of rhetoric and poetry alike was to place images clearly before the sight, whether "to give distinctness" or "to amaze,"¹⁷ so Hurd, Kames, Joseph Warton, Johnson, Blair and others said that clearness or vividness of detail is a distinguishing trait of true poetry. Some of these critics urged the poet to look directly at the object he intended to describe, and paint it exactly as he saw it, rather than to copy it at second-hand from another writer.

A more important contribution to the theory of the beauty of "particulars" was made by certain literary amateurs of natural

¹⁶"Optimism and Romanticism," *PMLA*, XLII (December, 1927), 921-45. Cf. *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), chap. vii.

¹⁷*On the Sublime*, translated by A. O. Prickard (Oxford, 1906), p. 32.

history. John Ogilvie, in his *Philosophical and Critical Observations*, mentioned a translation of the French work, *Spectacle de la nature* (1732) by Noel Antoine Pluche, as being "in almost everybody's hands," and recommended to poets the perusal of this, and similar works by English authors.¹⁸ Thomas Pennant, traveler and writer of many books on the flora and fauna of the British isles, scattered poetic quotations throughout the four volumes of his *British Zoology* (London, 1768-70), and hinted in his preface at the usefulness of certain descriptions to the poet in search of original themes, images and metaphors. His friend, John Aikin, evidently on the suggestion of these hints, published a few years later *An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry* (Warrington, 1777), from the dedication of which, to Pennant, one gathers that Aikin was sure of an appreciative circle of readers among gentlemen-amateurs of both science and poetry.

Aikin first complained of "the want of variety and novelty" in the imagery of contemporary poetry, and of the inexactness and dullness of description of even the most common objects, resulting from insufficient or unenlightened observation. Milton he praised for having described, in his picture of Eve's bower, such plants as "a botanist alone could have culled and sorted. . . ."¹⁹ Implied in every part of the essay was the belief that "Such is the variety of nature, that original painters, even of the same subject, need not be apprehensive of falling into an uninteresting sameness."²⁰ Suggesting specific new subjects for descriptive poetry, Aikin mentioned "the migration of birds" as affording both "uncommon scope for grand and original painting in natural history" and "copious matter for philosophical and moral reflexion." The subject attracted him for its originality because the poet would have to "discover and investigate new facts," as well as to "frame new combinations of words."²¹

Another essay of the sort, entitled "On the alliance of natural history and philosophy with poetry," was published, also at Warrington, in *Moral and Literary Dissertations* (1784) by Thomas Percival. Besides commenting, as usual, upon Milton, Thomson and others, for their accurate and original descriptions, and giving an account of an electrical experiment designed to illustrate the

¹⁸ (London, 1774), pp. 422-23.

¹⁹P. 48.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 87.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 131-32.

exact appearance of Michael's flaming sword in *Paradise Lost*, Percival recommended the sciences of physics and astronomy to the special study of poets. His more detailed suggestions of phenomena to be closely watched included the habits of rooks and domestic poultry, the smoke from cottage chimneys and the aurora borealis.²²

Further remarks upon the possible contributions of natural science to poetry appeared in Nathan Drake's *Literary Hours*, wherein he pointed out that Thomson, like Lucretius and Vergil, was both naturalist and poet, that Cowper's *Task* and Gisborne's *Walks in a Forest* contain "much accurate painting in natural history and a number of picturesque minutiae," and that "it is obvious that a great source of novelty to our poetry may be derived from the improved state of natural history." He also wrote approvingly of Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden*, which was perhaps the most prominent example in this period of a conscious application of natural history to poetry.²³

Cultivating a painter's perception of the details of landscape was also thought to be helpful in opening up a world of novel subject-matter to the poet. Drake's phrases, above, suggest the vocabulary of a painter. Thomas Twining, in a dissertation accompanying his translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, in 1789, said that one of the chief beauties of modern poetry, lacking in ancient, was picturesque description—that is, description of landscape. It was the "painter's eye," he thought, dwelling with minute care upon "the visible beauties of rural nature," which had taught, and would continue to teach the poet how to see and select new subjects. The Greeks "had no Thomsons, because they had no Claudes."²⁴ Somewhat later, James Hurdis, in a critical anthology of English poets, had much to say regarding novel "images from nature" which the aspiring author could always discover if he took the attitude of "a painter with colours and canvas before him, and the whole creation . . . [for] his subject."²⁵ He, too, after a list of the "minutiae" which well might engage the painter's or poet's attention, specified images of "greater importance," such as swift-running water, large bodies of water, storms on sea and land.²⁶

²²Pp. 237-38, 255-58, 260, 267.

²³(London, 1798), pp. 465-69.

²⁴*Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry . . . and Two Dissertations* (London, 1789), pp. 34-35.

²⁵*Lectures Shewing the Several Sources of that Pleasure which the Human Mind Receives from Poetry* (Bishopstone, Sussex, 1797), p. 1.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 139.

Certain passages explaining the novel images and feelings which a poet could imbibe from landscape were obviously based upon the optimistic conception of "the principle of plentitude" in nature. For instance, when John Ogilvie recommended the study of natural history to young authors, he declared that this study not only satisfies our natural thirst for the new, the curious, the diverse, but it enlarges "our ideas of the power and wisdom" of God, and of "the grandeur, the magnificence and the utility of the works of nature."²⁷ John Pinkerton, vindicating at once the excellence of Creation and its inexhaustibility of subject-matter for poetry, wrote in 1785: "Nature loves to vary all her operations: the little folly of man would only confine her. His modes of acting are few. Those of nature are infinite. He delights in systems. Nature knows no systems."²⁸ Here, whether or not the author was conscious of the fact, lies a possible challenge to the classical doctrine of "uniformity" as the principle in nature for authors to look for and imitate. J. Moir described the happy "plentitude" of nature in more glowing and particular terms:

The whole aspect of nature is so full of meaning, teems with so many beauties, and exhibits such a vast profusion of unexpected varieties, that every sensation she raises contributes somehow to human happiness. . . . Not a brook that murmurs as it runs, not a breeze that rustles among the branches, not a cow that lows on the plain, not a lamb that bleats and browses on the hill, not a bird that nestles and sings among the bushes, not a sight we see, not a sound we hear, which addresses not every faculty of the soul and every feeling of the heart in the simplest, sweetest, most persuasive accents, and which discovers not some new quality, or creates some new sensation!²⁹

These are the sensations and feelings, Moir went on to show, which give rise to original poetry. The passage is almost an explicit denial of the neo-classic doctrine that the poet must not become too deeply engrossed in the "low" or trivial details of nature.

A poetical *Essay on Sensibility* by W. L. Brown (1789) affords an additional illustration of the tendency to consider diversity as an excellence in itself. This contains a description of "the chain of being," emblem of the completeness and perfection of the divine creation. The poem also enumerates, in conventional "literary" language, many of "the ten thousand wonders" which are supposed to arouse the sensitive observer's awe and admiration. The list, though not specifically connected with literary composition, reads much like similar lists suggested by critics as original images:

²⁷*Philosophical and Critical Observations*, p. 413.

²⁸"Robert Heron," *Letters of Literature* (London, 1785), p. 323.

²⁹"Originality," *Gleanings*, pp. 103-4.

The pebble through pellucid waters shewn,
 The moss that clothes, the shrub that cleaves the stone,
 The modest-tinted flowers that deck the glade,
 The aged tree that spreads his awful shade,
 The feather'd race that wings th' ethereal way,
 The insect tribes that float upon the ray,
 The herds that graze, the flocks that nip the plain,
 And scaly natives of the wat'ry reign.³⁰

The wealth of subjects for literature disclosed by these myriad wonders of the non-human world, moreover, was thought to be immeasurably increased by the variety and diversity of the human race. The differences among human beings, the fact that no individual is like any other, have always, of course, been a subject for comment. The *Characters* of Theophrastus, for instance, which were perfectly well known to readers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, began with a preface remarking "the great diversity of manners" observable among the Greeks, and "those habitual peculiarities by which the manners of every one are distinguished."³¹ Shaftesbury took notice of the fact of diversity in "Sensus communis; an essay on the freedom of wit and humour" (1709). He believed, nevertheless, that universal "ultimate laws of mind" could be deduced from observation of apparent diversity, and should be, for the purposes of art.³²

Yet, very early in the preceding century, variety of character, especially in England, had been commented upon as if it added to the advantages of a country which harbored it, and as if it offered richness and novelty of subject to authors, especially of comedy. One of the best known expressions of this idea was by Sir William Temple, who explained the greater variety of English comic characters upon the stage, over that in ancient drama, by the fact of greater variety in English life itself.³³ By the middle of the eighteenth century, the suggestion that comic writers, at least, have an inexhaustible store of materials in the diversities and singularities of the human race, especially among Englishmen, was by no means a new one.

The doctrine that such variety in characterization is one of the chief sources of originality, and that it should be developed *in opposition* to the theory that great poetry demands simple characters,

³⁰(2d ed.; London, 1791), pp. 14-15.

³¹Translated by [Isaac Taylor] (London, 1831), pp. 3-4, 7.

³²*Characteristics*, ed. J. M. Robertson (New York, 1900), I, 95-96.

³³"Of poetry" (1690), *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn (Oxford, 1908-09), III, 104-5.

conforming to traditional, ideal types, was more strongly asserted in the latter half of the century. That some conflict was felt between the two theories of characterization is suggested by a remark of Joseph Warton in the *Adventurer*, No. 133. Comic poets, he pointed out, could make more use of the diversity of character existing in England than they had been doing of late. Original characters will never be lacking to an English author who studies the actual people about him and endeavors "to open those mines which have been so long and unaccountably neglected."³⁴ Again, several contributions to the *British Magazine* in the years 1765 and 1767 dealt with the subject of uniformity versus diversity in human character, as proper for representation in art. The first, "Observations on the imitations of the moderns," seemed to take sides with the uniformitarian view that art should represent only what is universally "natural"; and that similarity between the epics of Homer and Ossian is to be accounted for from the fact that "general ideas" of nature are always the same. Yet, the author proceeded: "Certainly if the doctrine of general ideas (that cant term) was to be universally received, without any limitation, farewell to all further attempts at original composition."³⁵ In February, 1767, an essay appeared "On the various characters of mankind," which, though not accredited to its proper source, was a reprint of part of Letter XXXVIII in William Melmoth's *Letters on Several Subjects by Sir Thomas Fitzosborne* (4th ed.; London, 1754). Melmoth wrote on "the infinite diversity of humour in the human race" as a stimulus to originality, especially in comedy. This field had been too much neglected, he thought, because of the habit indulged in by authors and critics of "judging too much by universal principles. Whereas there is a wonderful disparity in mankind, and numberless characters exist which cannot properly be reduced to any regular and fixed standard."³⁶

The idea that characters should be to a certain extent standardized according to several ideal types did not die at once, of course. Edmund Cartwright, for instance, in a review of Crabbe's *Village*, in 1783, thought that in the first part of the poem, depicting the miseries of the poor, there was "a great deal of painting that is truly characteristic"; but he could not completely approve it in view of "that indispensable rule, which both painters and poets

³⁴February 12, 1754 (London, 1753-54), II, 376.

³⁵VI (March, 1765), 137-39.

³⁶VIII, 68-9.

should equally attend to . . . namely, to form their individuals from ideas of general nature."³⁷ Again, fearful lest too much attention to "disparity" might cause authors to depict only eccentric individuals, W. Craig, in the *Lounger*, No. 49, January 7, 1786, pointed out the "corruption and abuse" to which the representation of particular characters is liable. Yet he praised Addison and Sterne for "giving minute pictures of manners, and of the nice figures of character."³⁸ Paper No. 68 of the same periodical, on the other hand, discussed the variety and distinctness of Shakespeare's characters as the chief evidence of his "creative power";³⁹ and this comment was not limited in its application to the comedies. Two papers on novels, in the *Edinburgh Bee*, in 1792, also reveal this liking for distinct individuality of character as created by Smollett, Richardson and Fielding.⁴⁰ Later, Francis Jeffrey, in some respects one of the last defenders of traditional neo-classic standards in the early nineteenth century, found and praised the same power of detailed, distinct characterization in Crabbe. Crabbe's poetry, Jeffrey said, contained a "prodigious mass of original observations." It included "such a rich and complete accompaniment of circumstances and details, as few ordinary observers either perceive or remember in realities. . . ."⁴¹

The details, then, of the physical world and of human character came to be more and more valued as a source of originality in art. Their distinctions and diversities were said to be capable of arousing complex, new and interesting sentiments, and especially, according to some critics influenced by the optimistic philosophy, to offer gratifying evidence of the wise and happy plenitude of nature.

2. Another series of efforts to define and encourage originality sprang from the conception that the source of this quality lies in the unique constitution of the author's mind. Underlying this conception were the same assumptions concerning the excellence of diversity which supported some of the new theories regarding originality in the content of literature. The acceptance of this fact of "differentness" in the personality of the author, and the construction upon it of a definition of originality sanctioning individuality, even "singularity," of manner or style in writing, meant

³⁷*Monthly Review*, LIX (November, 1783), 418-21.

³⁸*Lounger* (2d ed.; Edinburgh, 1787), I, 134-35.

³⁹May 20, 1786, *ibid.*, pp. 311-19.

⁴⁰Nos. 7 and 8 (London, n.d.), pp. 130, 133-34.

⁴¹*Edinburgh Review*, XX (November, 1812), 278.

again a revolutionary departure from neo-classic standards of uniformity.

The lines of thought along which this conclusion gradually developed were apparent in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth as well as in the eighteenth century. In the first place, Cicero's exposition of the uniform and diverse elements of human nature, in *De officiis*, gave authority to both sides of the argument, since he held that "we are invested by nature with two characters . . . one of these is universal . . . the other is the one that is assigned to individuals in particular." In the realm of moral action, Cicero maintained that "we must so act as not to oppose the universal laws of human nature," but we must also preserve our own "peculiar gifts," or "follow the bent of our own particular nature."⁴²

Secondly, the Skeptic philosophers among the Greeks, whose views and arguments were revived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England, emphasized the fact of diversity—not with any application to art, but to show the vanity of the philosophers' hopes of attaining any general or certain conclusions through the reason.⁴³ Joseph Glanvill, in both *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661) and *Lux Orientalis* (1662), developed the point, remarking upon every man's "constitutional partiality,"⁴⁴ and upon "the strange difference and diversity that there is in men's wits and intellectual craseis, as well as in the dispositions of their wills and appetites."⁴⁵ It was also in the skeptical spirit that Pope brought up the subject of human diversity in his "Epistle to Cobham" (1733), his theme being "the knowledge and characters of men," and the inability of man to live by reason, or to see anything as it really is, apart from the coloring lent by his own passions and his own distinctive character.⁴⁶

Thirdly, the idea of the diversity of temperaments and of a native inclination or "genius" toward one type of occupation more than another was common, from the sixteenth century on, in writings on education. Erasmus, Ben Jonson, John Locke all recognized inherent differences in the natures which the educator had to work upon, and, in general, held that this diversity should be respected

⁴²Bk. I, translated by W. Miller (London, 1913), pp. 109, 113-17.

⁴³See M. M. Patrick, *The Greek Sceptics* (New York, 1929), p. 310. Cf. chap. xx and appendix.

⁴⁴*The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, ed. M. E. Prior, for Facsimile Text Society (New York, 1931), p. 91.

⁴⁵*Lux Orientalis* (London, 1682), pp. 76, 79.

⁴⁶*Works*, eds. Elwin and Courthope (London, 1881), II, 15-22; III, 55-56.

and accommodated by the manner and aims of teaching.⁴⁷ A few eighteenth century treatises dealing with educational matters brought the optimistic principle of plenitude to the support of this theory. Thus, in opposing any pedagogical attempts to disguise the diversity of mankind, an essay "Of genius," in the *Occasional Paper* (1719), took the position that diversity contributes to universal harmony, and shows "the wisdom and beauty of Providence."⁴⁸ With a similar purpose, George Turnbull, in *A Treatise on Ancient Painting*, wrote of "the kind intention of nature in diversifying men's dispositions and talents," which contributed "to the enlargement of human happiness and perfection," just as "the variety of herbs and plants" contributed to "the beauty and utility of the sensible world."⁴⁹ Joseph Priestley wrote, in *First Principles of Government*, "The great excellence of human nature consists of the variety of which it is capable." This capability, he thought, differentiates man from the brutes, and makes him susceptible to infinite improvement. It is a mistake, therefore, to attempt "by uniform and fixed systems of education, to keep mankind always the same."⁵⁰

Fourthly, the fact of diversity had been noted, with various physiological and psychological explanations, by numerous general works on human nature. Juan Huarte's *Examen de ingenios* (1578), as translated by Richard Carew from an Italian version of 1594 by Camillo Camilli, accounted for the differences in men's wits as corresponding to differences in the moisture and temperature of their bodies. Thomas Hobbes gave the matter passing notice in the *Leviathan* (1651), being his explanation on differences in the kinds and degrees of the passions men are naturally subject to. An anonymous treatise of 1690 called *A Moral Essay upon the Soul of Man* placed the source of diversity largely in "the material structure and harmony of the body" and its more or less lively susceptibility to sensation.⁵¹ Associationist psychology brought further support to this observation. Some of the followers of Locke held that, if all our ideas come from sensations and the habitual asso-

⁴⁷See W. H. Woodward, *Desiderius Erasmus Concerning the Aim and Method of Education* (Cambridge, 1904), pp. 195-96; Jonson, "Timber, or Discoveries" (1620), *Critical Essays*, ed. Spingarn, I, 20; Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), ed. R. H. Quick (Cambridge, 1902), p. 82.

⁴⁸III, No. 10 (London, 1719), 15-16.

⁴⁹(London, 1740), p. xii.

⁵⁰(London, 1768), pp. 78-80.

⁵¹(London, 1690), p. 266.

ciations we make among sensations, there are bound to be great differences among us. Thus, an anonymous *Enquiry into the Origin of the Human Appetites and Affections* (attributed to John Gay, cousin of the poet) traced the origin of human diversity to "a difference of susceptibility" to sensation, which makes a man "more or less pliant and active in whatever he turns himself to, and gives him, or is itself, a tendency to the forming of a certain peculiar temper, or cast of mind. . . ."⁵² The author emphasized also the force of training and custom in creating certain habitual associations of ideas which diversify nations or smaller groups of individuals from each other. The conclusion was that what a man calls "absolutely fit, good in itself, etc.," as if from "intuitive knowledge," is really only relative truth, an idea which is an outgrowth only of that man's special, singular perceptions and mental associations.⁵³ A year later, in 1748, David Hartley, in his *Observations on Man*, drew attention, with a very similar explanation, to the variety of desires and aversions among men, and the unreliability, therefore, of generalizations regarding the uniformity of human nature.⁵⁴

Other general comments on diversity, either among individuals or among nations—comments which offered no explanation of the fact and which treated it as a more or less useful and fortunate circumstance—were too numerous during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to be cited here. One may take as typical a statement by Alexander Forbes, in *Essays Moral and Philosophical*, who used a phrase later significantly employed by Young in his *Conjectures*: "In all the turns and casts of human nature," Forbes wrote, "there is such an endless variety, that every person may be justly called an original."⁵⁵ This conclusion he did not apply, however, as Young did later, to any argument for individual resistance to conformity.

Along with these general remarks on the diversity of the human species, there were also favorable comments, from early times, on the special diversity of Englishmen. Many of these referred particularly, as I have shown, to the variety of subjects for comedy which England's odd array of peculiar and eccentric manners pro-

⁵²In S. Parr, *Metaphysical Tracts by English Philosophers of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1837), p. 65.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁵⁴(4th ed.; London, 1801), I, 370.

⁵⁵(London, 1734), p. 58.

vided the dramatist; but some also referred to this condition as favorable to the appearance of individual genius. Thus Temple declared it was his belief that, possibly because of the unevenness of the English climate and the freedom of the English government, there were more diverse "dispositions" among his English acquaintances, and more "true genius," than among all he had met "of the better sort" in other nations.⁵⁶ The *Guardian*, No. 144, drew the same conclusion, namely, that because of the "great freedom of temper" and "unconstrained manner of living" in England, there was an unusual number of "shining genius's . . . in the several arts and sciences."⁵⁷ This observation had become thoroughly conventional by the time that Young employed it in his *Conjectures*, saying: "Something new may be expected from Britons particularly."⁵⁸

The justification of an author's indulging in his own particular manner, or allowing the peculiarities of his own point of view and temperament to color his style, however, was another matter. Of all the theories so far cited, perhaps some of the educational principles and some of the glorifications of national character tended in that direction. But plenty of critics noticed the natural diversity of human temperaments only to warn authors against allowing its expression in art. Throughout the latter half of the century, the ideal of a style which would be simply excellent, according to uniform standards of propriety, and not national, individual or peculiar, continued to hold force. Thus, a reviewer of *The English Connoisseur*, in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for June, 1766, maintained that "a manner is nothing more than a characteristic deviation from propriety and truth. . . . In proportion as there is manner there is defect."⁵⁹ The editor of the *Monthly Review*, Ralph Griffiths, reviewing Henry Brooke's *The Fool of Quality*, in the same year, noted the "singularity" of the work only to disapprove.⁶⁰ Generally, also, Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his famous *Discourses*, spoke of the "peculiar marks" of individual styles in painting as faults.⁶¹ As late as 1797, Thomas Wallace wrote an essay "On the variations of English prose," which excluded the writings of Sterne

⁵⁶"Of poetry," *Critical Essays*, ed. Spingarn, III, 105.

⁵⁷August 19, 1713 (London, 1714), II, 328.

⁵⁸Ed. E. J. Morley (Manchester, 1918), p. 33.

⁵⁹XXXVI, 286.

⁶⁰XXXV (August, 1766), 146.

⁶¹*Literary Works* (London, 1819), I, 165.

because his style "was merely the style of an individual," displaying an eccentricity close to affectation, and therefore little suited to be "generally adopted by English prose writers."⁶²

Yet there seems to have been some recognition, even among the defenders of the imitation of models, on neo-classic, uniformitarian grounds, that an effect of pleasing originality was sometimes due to an author's characteristic manner of writing, whether he imitated a model or not. Hurd made this admission, for instance, with the remark that "the Greek rhetoricians have attempted to pursue this matter with some accuracy," and have classified many types of style which proceed from different types of minds.⁶³ He still seemed to have certain ideal, objective patterns in mind, however, rather than unlimited freedom for the individual author. Blair tolerated the individual, characteristic style more freely, in spite of his generally favorable attitude toward the imitation of models. The plainest indication of his view came in a lecture of "directions for forming style," where he spoke of the "great latitude" which must be left for genius—"for that particular determination which every one receives from nature to one manner of expression more than another."⁶⁴ Even Reynolds, in spite of his dislike for singularity, made certain exceptions for "a strong inclination" and "great and irresistible impulses."⁶⁵ And Samuel Johnson admitted to Boswell, in the year 1778, that he believed every man had "a style peculiar to himself."⁶⁶

The treatment of the natural diversity of individuals, however, as an argument against imitation, and as one of the principal sources of originality was a new feature of the criticism of the middle and later part of the century. John Armstrong's phrasing of the point, in his *Sketches* of 1758, is particularly interesting because it contains echoes of the writings of over a century in praise of the variety of nature, while adding particular emphasis to the connection between this fact and originality in literature. His objection to imitating models was that it tends "to confine the variety of nature; which plainly intends that mankind should be distinguishable one from another by their air, voice and manner, no less than

⁶²*Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, VI (Dublin, 1797), Part II, p. 70.

⁶³"A discourse on poetical imitation," *Epistolae ad Pisones* (2d ed.; London, 1753), II, 202-203.

⁶⁴*Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (London, 1783), I, 401.

⁶⁵*Literary Works*, II, 193.

⁶⁶*Boswell's life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill (Oxford, 1887), III, 280.

by their faces." The writer should at all times allow his "own characteristical manner . . . [to] distinguish itself."⁶⁷ Edward Young, in his slightly longer development of the theme, likewise used expressions of a conventional sort, but with a new significance. When he listed the bad effects of imitation as three, the second was that it counteracts and thwarts the tendency of nature toward differentiation:

She brings us into the world all originals: No two faces, no two minds, are just alike; but all bear nature's evident mark of separation on them. Born originals, how comes it to pass that we die copies? That meddling ape imitation . . . snatches the pen, and blots out nature's mark of separation, cancels her kind intention, destroys all mental individuality. . . .⁶⁸

To follow nature, then, for Young, was still the aim of literature; but nature creates individuals who are all "originals," and authors must therefore, singly and independently, discover her in the depths of their own subjective consciousness.

After these two expositions of the value of the singular and individual style, however, it could still be said, by a contributor to the *British Magazine*, in June, 1760, that "it has not hitherto occurred to any of the critics, that an author's peculiar character is stamp'd upon his works, and may be discovered under the disguise of different forms in all his compositions."⁶⁹ Later, many other short comments appeared calling favorable attention to signs of "peculiar character" in style, and implying that this type of investigation and criticism was a new one. Adam Ferguson, in 1767, wrote that "Every production carries the mark of . . . [the author's] character as a man."⁷⁰ A few years later, George Colman presented a defence of singularity in style, on the grounds of natural diversity, using again the trite comparison between variety in characters and variety in faces: "The wide field of nature gives a scope for that variety, which ever distinguishes an aera of genius. Never was there a period, wherein excellent authors flourished, but their several manners were as different as their faces. . . ."⁷¹ "Singularity," wrote Samuel Pratt, under the pseudonym of Courtney Melmoth, in 1776, "is at all times better than sameness; I mean, it is better to write like an original, than a copier." This was in a

⁶⁷*Miscellanies* (London, 1770), II, 167-68.

⁶⁸*Conjectures*, pp. 19-20.

⁶⁹I, 363.

⁷⁰*An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, p. 270.

⁷¹"The Gentleman," No. 6 (1775), in *Prose on Several Occasions* (London, 1787), I, 121.

defence of the style of Laurence Sterne, in the course of which he also observed that "Every good writer is possest of some marks of excellence peculiar to himself."⁷² This was the view, also, of the poet Cowper: "Milton's manner was peculiar," he wrote, in a letter of December 13, 1784, to the Reverend John Newton. "So is Thomson's . . . A judicious and sensible reader, like yourself, will not say that my manner is not good, because it does not resemble theirs, but will rather consider what it is in itself."⁷³ J. Moir treated the topic at greater length, in 1785, in his essay on "Originality." Having mentioned the superior discernment for small things and the superior sensibility which characterize the original genius, he remarked that original writers "perceive every object through a medium peculiar to themselves." This was true of Thomson, he thought, who wrote of everything in a perfectly natural, but also a "singular" fashion that was all his own. "We have all our own way of thinking whenever we do think; . . . our sentiments and ideas are never destitute of novelty or justness but when we cease to think."⁷⁴

How widespread the conception had become, toward the end of the century, that a "characteristic manner" was not a fault but a virtue in composition, is suggested by an "Essay on style in writing" by Robert Burrowes, in the *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* of 1797. The complete title and the statement of the purpose of the article showed how far some criticism had traveled from the neo-classic ideal of a universal, impersonal style. The title reads as follows: "Essay on style in writing, considered with respect to thoughts and sentiments as well as words, and indicating the writer's peculiar and characteristic disposition, habits and powers of mind." The statement of the author's aim showed his conviction that at least a vague recognition of personal elements in style was almost universal: ". . . I believe very few persons ever read a book, at least a book of fancy, without forming some ideas of the author's character. If this be so universally done, it is desirable that some assistance be given by which it may be regulated to greater certainty, and directed to some advantage."⁷⁵

⁷²*Observations on the Night Thoughts of Dr. Young* (London, 1776), pp. 73-74.

⁷³*The Correspondence of William Cowper*, ed. T. Wright (London, 1904), II, 280.

⁷⁴*Gleanings*, I, 104-109.

⁷⁵v, 46.

To conclude, the problem of novelty and originality was of great interest to most of the critics of the latter half of the eighteenth century, and the explicit suggestions of how to achieve it were many. Originality of expression, if one imitates a model, is always desirable and possible. Furthermore, "nature," in the widest sense, is inexhaustible. Original themes may still be found in a supernatural world created by the associative power of the imagination; or in the local scenes and customs of the author's own era; or in the details of natural objects and of human characters and action, which are infinitely various. The growing emphasis upon this last suggestion was one of the newest elements in the discussion. One of its implications was to shift attention from design, in art, to liveliness and realism of detail. Already, in eighteenth century literature, the best novels, satires and comedies had not been lacking in either excellence of design or distinctness of detail; nor in painting, had the best landscapes and portraits lacked these qualities. But for a long time, the imitative tradition had helped to sanctify a prevailing neo-classic theory that these forms of art were inferior to epic poetry and heroic tragedy, and to allegorical painting. The new theory, then, may have been a belated rationalization of the pleasure which the eighteenth century public instinctively took in the best and most characteristic productions of its creative artists.

Furthermore, nature is inexhaustible in the sense that the elemental passions are new to everyone who feels them. Under favorable conditions an author feels them strongly and expresses them sincerely without "taking thought"; his originality then consists in his perfectly spontaneous manner of expression. The use of expressions like "divine fire" and "frenzy" to describe the inspiration of the original genius had been common since the days of the classical rhetoricians, and though perhaps it was unduly prominent in the writings of eighteenth century primitivists, it was found, also, among most of the more conservative critics.

Finally, nature is inexhaustible in the sense that it creates "an original" in every human individual, who, if he becomes an author and does not allow outside influences to erase the distinguishing traits, will express his original character in everything he writes. The argument that imitation of any other writer, or too much reading, effaces the unique individuality of the genius's thought and style, and goes against "nature's kind intention," could be and was

misused by inferior critics, but it seems to me to have been a significant preparation for the better understanding of such a "singular" author as Sterne, and for that enjoyment of the personal, subjective element in literature which is one aspect of the romantic movement.

